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Viewing cable 09SANJOSE389, COSTA RICA AND CHINA BUST "SNAKEHEAD" TRAFFICKING

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#09SANJOSE389**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANJOSE389	2009-05-12 19:45	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Jose

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/NotasDestacadas/Investigacion2697549.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/NotasSecundarias/Investigacion2697564.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/NotaPrincipal/Investigacion2697557.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/NotasSecundarias/Investigacion2697581.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/NotasSecundarias/Investigacion2697579.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/NotasSecundarias/Investigacion2702553.aspx>
<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-04/Investigacion/Relacionados/Investigacion2702554.aspx>

VZCZCXRO2596
PP RUEHGH
DE RUEHSJ #0389/01 1321945
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 121945Z MAY 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0825
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0175
RUEHGZ/AMCONSUL GUANGZHOU PRIORITY 0001
RUEHGH/AMCONSUL SHANGHAI PRIORITY 0001

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SAN JOSE 000389

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN, DRL AND EAP/CM; ALSO FOR DS/HSTC
DOJ FOR DOMESTIC SECURITY SECTION

CBP FOR OFFICE OF ALIEN SMUGGLING INTERDICTION AND OFFICE OF
INTELLIGENCE
BEIJING FOR ARSO KEITH KNOWLES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KTIP](#) [ASEC](#) [KCRM](#) [KFRD](#) [CH](#) [CS](#)

SUBJECT: COSTA RICA AND CHINA BUST "SNAKEHEAD" TRAFFICKING
RING

REF: A. BEIJING 01062

[1](#)B. WHA/CEN ASDAR OF APRIL 16

Classified By: DCM Peter Brennan for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: As reported in Refs, Costa Rican and Chinese authorities have broken up an apparent child-trafficking ring which was attempting to bring over three hundred Chinese children into Costa Rica. According to GOCR officials, Chinese authorities have arrested at least three suspects in China, one of whom is cooperating with the authorities. In San Jose, the Costa Rican government has fired one former Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, who is being investigated for tampering with the visa process. GOCR authorities are still investigating how many of the reported 109 minors who were issued visas (see Ref A) actually entered Costa Rica. Immigration officials in San Jose believe the victims were being brought to Costa Rica to serve ten years of indentured servitude before "earning" their freedom. We understand that Costa Rica will host a meeting of Central American immigration officials on May 20-21 to discuss Asian smuggling/trafficking in the region. END SUMMARY.

Joint Chinese-Costa Rican Investigation

[1](#)2. (SBU) On April 24, Embassy officials met with Costa Rican Director of Immigration Manuel Zamora to review the status of the investigation into a Chinese child smuggling/trafficking ring, first made public to the Costa Rican media the week of April 13, and reported by Embassy Beijing in Ref A. Zamora reiterated the base facts of the case as reported in Refs--that snakehead mafia members had applied for "family reunification visas" for over three hundred Chinese youths, claiming their alleged parents were Costa Rican residents. Irregularities in the applications and reports of the attempted bribery of consular officers at Costa Rica's Embassy in Beijing triggered an investigation by Costa Rican and Chinese authorities.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to Zamora, the Costa Rican/Chinese investigation revealed that in many cases the alleged parents of applicants were only a few years older than the applicants themselves. Additionally, some petitions listed the same parents for three separate children, which raised a flag given China's long-standing one-child policy. As reported in Ref A, Chinese officials then began to sit in on interviews with applicants, determining that the applicants had no real links to their alleged parents in Costa Rica. Further investigation revealed that the snakeheads were auctioning off family names--approaching a Costa Rican with a Chinese surname, such as "Wu", and offering a price for the use of their name. The snakehead counterparts in Guandong would then auction the name to clients in China who also had the surname "Wu".

Arrests in China, Ongoing Investigation in Costa Rica

[1](#)4. (C) Chinese authorities have made at least three arrests in the case, and one of the suspects is cooperating with the authorities, according to Zamora. Chinese policy also reportedly uncovered a "how to" manual for Chinese clients applying for Costa Rican visas. Thus far only one Costa Rican official, Fernando Wong, has been implicated in the scandal. (NOTE: a review of visa records reveals that Mr. Wong has never applied for a U.S. visa). Wong is accused of traveling to China to attempt to bribe Consular officials, as reported in Ref A. Wong has been fired from his low-level

administrative position with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (itself a significant step, given the stiff job protections built into the Costa Rican civil service), and is under investigation by the Costa Rican judicial police. Two other non-official Costa Ricans of Asian origin are also under investigation, though the lack of a Judicial Cooperation Agreement between Costa Rica and China might limit the information that could be used in court if charges are brought against the individuals.

¶5. (C) Costa Rican officials are unsure of how many Chinese might have been trafficked into Costa Rica before authorities became aware of the ring. Zamora stated that the joint Costa

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Rican-Chinese effort prevented the travel of some three hundred teenagers, aged 12-18. If any of the Chinese youths did make it to Costa Rica, it is believed that they would have melded into "artificial" nuclear families where their presence would not be seen as unusual. Zamora said that in all likelihood the adolescents would work for ten years without pay for their "family", then be freed of their servitude. Zamora stated that the Department of Immigration as well as the Costa Rican police services are continuing to investigate whether any Chinese linked to the ring made it into Costa Rica, and if so, their current whereabouts. He added that there may be one significant fringe benefit from the current investigation: the 2007 smuggling case, which was cracked by a Costa Rican sting operation led by Zamora (and which generated threats against his personal safety), may be re-opened (See 2007 San Jose 132, NOTAL.)

Next Steps

¶6. (SBU) Costa Rica is sending a high-level immigration official to Beijing in June to meet with Costa Rican Embassy and Chinese officials to further discuss this trafficking case in particular. Zamora also stated that he will host a meeting of Central American Immigration officials on May 20-21 in San Jose to discuss the issue of the smuggling and trafficking of Asians to the region. The meeting will be technical in nature, focusing on migrant documents and exchanging information on Costa Rica's knowledge of the network system used by snakehead groups to obtain malafide visas for Chinese nationals. In addition, the national legislature may hold hearings on the issue. The Chairman of the Counternarcotics Committee, Federico Tinoco, happened to be visiting his son (on a scholarship) in Beijing when the Costa Rica story broke in the media there.

COMMENT: Further Investigation/Prosecution Crucial

¶7. (C) While this latest incident must be viewed as a Costa Rican-Chinese success story, it should also serve as a loud wake-up call to GOCR officials. While human trafficking issues are not new in Costa Rica, this is the largest known case of attempted trafficking, and first major case of child-trafficking, offering further proof to otherwise doubtful public officials that trafficking is indeed an issue in Costa Rica. With a soon-to-be opened Embassy in Cuba, another major departure point for smuggling/trafficking cases to Costa Rica, as well as the continuing consular operations in China, GOCR officials must be at the top of their game to combat international trafficking. Fortunately, Zamora and his senior staff in San Jose, and Ambassador Antonio Burgues and his staff in Beijing, did all the right things in this case, not only breaking up an apparent child trafficking ring before it could really get started, but forging a new partnership with Chinese counterparts in the process. The May conference on Asian smuggling should be a positive next step, but locating the Chinese children who were issued visas, and prosecuting those responsible, would be even better. Our thanks to Embassy Beijing for teaming with us

"long distance" to continue to work on this case.

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